

THOMAS PAINE, COMMON SENSE, AND THE REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS
IN AMERICA

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Allan R. Miller

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John Zimmerman
Approved for the Major Department

Samuel Byler
Approved for the Graduate Council

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"On this celebrated publication [Common Sense], which has received the testimony of praise from the wise and learned of different nations, we need only remark ... that it gave spirit and resolution to the Americans, who were then wavering and undetermined, to assert their rights, and inspired a decisive energy into their counsels: we may therefore venture to say, without fear of contradiction, that the great American cause owed as much to the pen of Paine as to the sword of Washington."¹

Joel Barlow recorded these words on his copy of Paine's original booklet which he had purchased while a student at Yale College during the American Revolution.

Thomas Paine deserves to be better understood in mid-twentieth century America. Most historians today assume that Paine, above all his contemporaries, best caught the public political sentiment in those early critical months of 1776. Common Sense both influenced and represented public feeling. Moreover, Common Sense as a political document is important to Americans today. It helps trace our American political institutions to their Revolutionary roots. Along with this, Paine helps us see the beginnings of our American constitutional development. ✓ Common Sense and several of Paine's other writings also provide a firsthand account of the revolutionary events which took place in America from 1774 to 1787. While almost

¹Charles B. Todd, The Life and Letters of Joel Barlow (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1886), p. 237.

every new political organization quotes him in support of its cause, most Americans recognize this revolutionist in name only. Therefore, those students of history who attempt to find a part of the social and political local color of the American Revolutionary War days should discover Paine's writings.

This study is limited to only a part of Paine's life. It coordinates his early days in England, beginning with his birth in 1737, with his first period of American residence, which began in 1774 and lasted until 1787. When Paine left America's shores in 1787, this thesis takes leave of him, for he never again took the significant place in the American saga that had been his during the Revolution.

The purpose of this thesis on Common Sense is three-fold: (1) to show that Paine's previous life and experience influenced the ideas of Common Sense; (2) to present the political theories of Common Sense; and (3) to trace the reactions of Paine and his contemporaries to the publication of his pamphlet. That Common Sense was the culmination of Paine's previous life is evident. The resentment Paine experienced during his younger days in England came out in his pamphlet in the form of animosity for the English Crown and English social elite. In regard to the political theories found in the pages of Common Sense, the real question involved is whether or not Paine said anything about political thought which was original. It is a well-accepted fact of history that Paine's Common Sense influenced the American people in favor of independence from Great

Britain. The thesis treats how and why they were influenced. The most surprised person of all after the publication of Common Sense was Thomas Paine. His interesting reaction to his overnight success is traced in the last pages.

In researching and coordinating Paine's English life with his writing of Common Sense, one sometimes feels that all of Paine's early experiences were direct preparation for that most important literary event. One also realizes that Paine probably would have remained virtually unknown without the publication of Common Sense. It was Paine's passport to acceptance among the American people and, astonishingly, among the socially astute English. Later, one becomes aware that Common Sense was also Paine's entre into the American scene. Its publication in Philadelphia gave him a broad base from which to work there. This pamphlet was certainly Paine's lifetime stepstone.

A majority of the research was involved in perusing Paine's biographers. Paine's first biographer was James Cheetham, who wrote during Paine's own lifetime. Cheetham's accounts may readily be dismissed as pure vitriol against Paine and his writings. In fact, after the publication of Cheetham's Life of Thomas Paine in 1809, Paine's friends sued Cheetham for libel.

Paine's chief rescuer was Moncure D. Conway, who edited his four volume Writings of Thomas Paine in 1894-1896. In 1909, Conway wrote a two-volume work entitled The Life of Thomas Paine

which treated Paine favorably. History has accepted Conway's works as being the most scholarly and objective treatment of Thomas Paine. The foundation for this assessment has been built on Conway's case for Paine.

One of the Paine biographers who cannot be overlooked is William M. Van der Weyde. Van der Weyde wrote and edited in ten volumes The Life and Works of Thomas Paine which was published for the Thomas Paine National Historical Association in 1925. It is clear that Van der Weyde bases his works on Conway's research. However, he is not so careful as Conway in his scholarship, leaving many items which need further explanation. His style of writing is so simple that junior high school students should have little or no difficulty reading his books on Paine. This simplicity is at times his strength.

The student of Paine may also find Howard Fast's Citizen Thomas Paine pertinent to his study. However, Fast is no respecter of fact. His favorable treatment of Paine is highly fictionalized.

Paine's latest biographer of renown is Dr. Philip S. Foner, who edited The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine in two volumes in 1945. Foner's works include an excellent fifty-page introductory biography of Paine. Foner's chief advantage is his careful use of footnotes in explaining more fully the circumstances of Paine's writings. Foner also has the most up-to-date bibliography of works on Paine.

Two other books deserve mention as being valuable in any study of Thomas Paine's Common Sense. They are Harry H. Clark's Thomas Paine: Representative Selections and Nelson F. Adkins' Common Sense and Other Political Writings.

CHAPTER II

PAINE'S PRE-AMERICAN YEARS

Thomas Paine was born in Thetford, England, on January 29, 1737.¹ His ancestry, while in doubt, seemed to be of some distinction in Norfolk County. Paine's mother, Frances Cocke, was the daughter of an attorney who was a member of the Church of England. Joseph Paine, his father, was eleven years younger than his wife. He was a Quaker, and as a freeman of the borough had a right of pasturage on the commons. In addition to being a farmer, Joseph Paine was a respected tradesman of the staymaking art. He has been characterized by contemporaries as a reputable citizen who was poor, yet honest. Paine's mother has been described as an eccentric woman with a sour temper.² Her temperament may account for Paine's lifelong aloofness toward women. His writings contain several affectionate allusions to his father, but none can be found for his mother.

Paine's formal education left much to be desired even by eighteenth-century standards. He attended the Thetford Grammar School. There he was not under the master of the school, but under the usher, William Knowler, who related many high

¹Moncure D. Conway, The Life of Thomas Paine, I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), p. 3.

²Ibid.

sea adventures to the youthful Paine. These adventure stories influenced him more than the subject matter studied at school. Paine also had a particular forte for science and his first desire to go to America came during those school days after reading a natural history of America, or so he relates in his later reflections of his boyhood days.³

Paine gained more from his education at home than he did from school. From his Quaker father Paine was the recipient of a careful ethical training. There is no doubt that this influenced his later thinking in positive ways. Nevertheless, in later life he was never a strict Quaker.⁴ For example, Paine vehemently disavowed Quakerism during the American Revolution.⁵

Paine's school days were spent in an English society where his family found itself in a poverty role. Moreover, the average citizen was apathetic toward power and politics. Men and women were hung for trivial offenses. Capital punishment was not only a fact, but was often accompanied by the infliction

³Moncure D. Conway, (ed.), The Writings of Thomas Paine, IV (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), p. 62.

⁴One of the first historical questions surrounding the study of Thomas Paine was to what degree his Quaker background influenced his American writing. Moncure Conway, Paine's first major biographer of any historical repute, seems to have greatly emphasized the influence of Quakerism on Paine's writing. Professor Harry H. Clark of the University of Wisconsin in Thomas Paine: Representative Selections, has gone to extreme trouble to disprove Conway.

⁵Philip S. Foner, (ed.), The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine, I (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), pp. 73-101.

of savage tortures. Paine was reminded everyday of these injustices, for the stocks and gallows were placed near the school. Young Paine was made aware of the political corruption going on during his youth in the Quaker meetings, possibly the only place where social protest was heard.⁶ This Quaker spirit of reform which weighed heavily upon Paine's mind during his youth partially influenced his later ideas on universal manhood rights.

Paine was taken from his studies at school and cast into the adult world of work at the age of thirteen. He was forced to help with making stays because his father was finding it difficult to make a living. After four years of staymaking, Paine ran away from home to begin life anew on the sea.

There is no record of Paine's years on board the small privateer on which he sailed, nor is there record for his returning years as a staymaker at Sandwich. In that same year he married Mary Lambert, who died the following year. Because of this event and the fact that Paine's staymaking job was not prospering, he decided to prepare himself for the kind of job his late wife's father held, that of exciseman.

Paine wrote his father about his idea to take up the job of exciseman. The project found favor with his father, and Paine went to London to study excise laws. After a few months of study, he returned to Thetford. There he continued his

⁶William M. Van der Weyde, The Life and Works of Thomas Paine, I (New Rochelle: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925), p. 5.

studies while serving an apprenticeship as a supernumerary officer. On August 8, 1764, Paine was sent to watch for smugglers at Alford.

Thus Thomas Paine, by the time he was twenty-five, was engaged in the business of executing the excise acts. He found that his job as exciseman was not only promotionless and low paying, but also filled with neglect and corruption. His own record was not above reproach, as he was dismissed on August 27, 1765, when his superior officer caught him "stamping."⁷ He was quickly reinstated on July 4, 1766, after writing a letter of apology to the Board of Trade. However, Paine did not assume another position as exciseman until February 19, 1768. In the meantime, he barely managed to keep from starving by taking up jobs as a staymaking journeyman and later as a teacher.

Paine's second attempt as an exciseman took place at Lewes in Sussex. There he lived with the Quaker family of Samuel Ollive. When Mr. Ollive died in 1769, Paine had to run Ollive's tabacconist trade (in addition to his excise job) to support the surviving family. Thomas Paine married Elizabeth Ollive, the late Samuel Ollive's daughter, on March 26, 1771.

All was not going well for England's excisemen by 1772. They were suffering from wages so low they could barely support

⁷The practice of "stamping" was a common one for eighteenth century English excisemen. Generally, it consisted of estimating the goods a trader might have in his warehouse, without making an actual trip to the given warehouse for an exact count. Detective rounds on the part of excisemen were offensive to traders, so "stamping" alleviated this sticky visitation.

themselves. These excisemen united and contributed a sum of money which they gave to Paine to further their cause before Parliament. Paine heartily accepted this task because he needed the extra money and because basically he wanted to improve the status of the laboring classes of his country. This cause led to the publication of his first major article, "The Case of the Officers of Excise."⁸ Paine not only wrote this article to Parliament, but he also spent the winter of 1772-73 in London verbally debating the cause of the excisemen in true lobbyist fashion. When all hope of relief had ceased, he disappointedly returned to his now debt-ridden tobacco shop at Lewes. And, to further complicate his life, on April 8, 1774, he was dismissed from his excise post because of his lobby activities, although the Board said it was because he had left his post without permission. Paine made an appeal to the Board, but this time his petition was rejected. So, at age thirty-seven, Paine again found himself in a poverty situation.

Paine and his wife mutually separated on June 4, 1774. The reason for this separation is nowhere to be found in recorded history. It has been assumed by several biographers that from the very start of their marriage there was no cohabitation and that this led to divorce.⁹ Neither Paine nor his wife ever

⁸In 1772, this article was printed only as a plea to Parliament, but in 1793, when Paine's fame was established, it was published as a pamphlet in London.

⁹Conway, Life of Paine, I, p. 31.

commented on the reason for divorce. After his divorce, he returned to London where he had previously enjoyed the company of men such as Oliver Goldsmith and Benjamin Franklin.¹⁰

Paine must have reflected on the tragic life which somehow was uniquely his own, while he traveled the road from Lewes to London. By far the biggest influence on his first twenty years was his alienation from "better society." Unlike some poor who were content with their station simply because they accepted reality, Paine was obsessed with the ugliness of his own poverty. Overcoming the disadvantages of poverty could only be an uphill struggle, but Paine set his goals high. Is it any wonder that later in life, therefore, Paine attacked the aristocrats of his past experience whom he fully believed had kept him down for so long during his lifetime?

Paine's past had been characterized by job failure. So far as the actual trade of staymaking was concerned, he must have been proficient since he could rely on this ability to bring him through when all else failed. It is unfortunate that some historians have given misplaced emphasis to Paine's corset-making art in order to play up his eccentricity. Paine's job failure during this time was due mainly to his inability to get along with people, although he loved mankind. For example,

¹⁰It seems likely that David Williams, principal of a boys school just outside London, introduced Paine to Franklin in 1774. No historical proof can be offered for this, but Paine, Franklin, and Williams had certain scientific and literary items in common which probably led to their mutual acquaintances. See Van der Weyde's Life and Works of Thomas Paine, I, p. 14, for further explanation.

Conway recorded in his biography that as a staymaking journeyman, Paine frequently quarrelled with his fellow workmen.¹¹ This seems not to have been an isolated instance. Later Paine had good reason for not getting along with his governmental superiors while an exciseman. One would suspect another reason for his job failures was because of his totally abstract way of thinking. Paine could not reconcile the menial jobs he held with his great thoughts. In Sandwich, where Paine was once employed as a staymaker, there was a legend that he collected a congregation in his room in the market place and lectured on religion.¹² Much of the time which should have been devoted to the concerns of his job was spent in meditating on ideas, recording them, and probably reading in order to stimulate new thoughts. With this intellectual revolt disturbing his mind and his failure as an exciseman especially weighing heavily upon him, Paine revolted against the undemocratic theories of his government. Clearly he needed a change of environment.

With a letter of recommendation from his friend, Benjamin Franklin, Paine left for America in October of 1774. The letter was addressed to Franklin's son-in-law, Richard Bache and read:

The bearer, Mr. Thomas Paine, is very well recommended to me, as an ingenious, worthy young man. He goes to Pennsylvania with a view of settling there. I request you to give him your best advice and countenance,

¹¹Conway, Life of Paine, I, p. 18.

¹²Ibid., p. 15.

as he is quite a stranger there. If you can put him in a way of obtaining employment as a clerk, or assistant tutor in a school, or assistant surveyor, (of all which I think him very capable,) so that he may procure a subsistence at least, till he can make acquaintance and obtain a knowledge of the country, you will do well, and much oblige your affectionate father.¹³

¹³ Albert H. Smyth, (ed.), The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, VI (New York: Macmillan Co., 1906), pp. 248-249.

CHAPTER III

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONIST

Thomas Paine arrived in America during November of 1774. He experienced no trouble finding helpful friends in Philadelphia since he had the letter of introduction from Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin. Paine penned a thank-you letter to Franklin in London after he had established himself with permanent work by March of 1775:

Your countenancing me has obtained for me many friends and much reputation, for which please to accept my most sincere thanks. I have been applied to by several gentlemen to instruct their sons, on very advantageous terms to myself; and a printer and bookseller here, a man of reputation and property, Robert Aitken, has lately attempted a magazine, but, having little or not turn that way himself, he has applied to me for assistance.¹

One reason that Paine delayed this March 4 letter to the man responsible for his well-being in America was that he was doubtful of his own ability to find and hold a job. However, Paine found his opportunity in America in the field of journalism. His first vocational choice was not journalism, but teaching. According to the diary of Benjamin Rush, Paine was "to give private lessons upon geography to young ladies and gentlemen."² It was only while waiting for employment

¹John Bigelow, (ed.), The Works of Benjamin Franklin, VI (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), pp. 361-362n.

²George W. Corner, (ed.), The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 113.

as a teacher that Paine took a position as a printer under Robert Aitken.³

Robert Aitken, Paine's employer, was a Scotsman who had come to Philadelphia in 1769 and established a publishing and printing business in the back of his bookstore.⁴ At the time Paine met Aitken, the editor was trying unsuccessfully to publish the Pennsylvania Magazine. Paine became editor in February, 1775 and served in that capacity for eighteen months. As editor, Paine received a salary of twenty-five pounds yearly.⁵ He published enough important articles to become well known among most Philadelphians and make the magazine profitable for its owner.

Paine wrote many articles as guest editor of newspapers such as the Pennsylvania Journal and Pennsylvania Gazette. His opinions on social reforms, which he early advocated, were not limited to his own magazine. Paine's pen made appeals for abolition of slavery, women's rights, abolishment of duelling and a rational approach to divorce.⁶ Paine urged peaceful acceptance of these measures, but hoped they would be incorporated into society as quickly as possible. His past biographers have seemed puzzled that he did not immediately deal

³Ibid.

⁴J. Thomas Scharf et al., History of Philadelphia, I (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, 1884), p. 309.

⁵Ibid. However, Conway in his Life of Paine, I, p. 42 and Van der Weyde in Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 19, state Paine's salary as fifty pounds yearly (250 dollars).

⁶Conway, Life of Paine, I, p. 47.

with any of the pressing political problems between the colonies and England. Moncure Conway ignored the question entirely, while Philip Foner contended that it was due to the insistence of Aitken and to the fact that Paine still believed in possible reconciliation between the colonies and the mother country.⁷ It was unlikely that Aitken held Paine back, even for reasons of preserving contributions from wealthy Tories to his magazine. The Paine articles on social reform would certainly have been as equally appalling to those contributors and there was no evidence that that was the case. Also, Aitken was not of the same mind as his conservative subscribers, as he "took the popular side during the Revolution, and came near going to. . .prison."⁸

A more probable reason for Paine's slow political start might well be found in the local 1774-75 Philadelphia scene. Philadelphia was most assuredly a contrast to anything Paine had known in England and it was a city quite different in political enthusiasm than Boston, New York or Charleston. The vast blend of Scotch, Welsh, Irish, German, Dutch, French and Negroes meant a fresh cultural synthesis. But, unlike other colonial cities, Philadelphia's cultural synthesis led to a social and political conservatism.

⁷ Foner, Complete Writings of Paine, I, p. xii.

⁸ Scharf, History of Philadelphia, I, p. 309.

Philadelphia's government remained relatively quiet while Boston was reacting with fervor against the Intolerable Acts in 1774. John Penn, the governor, represented the enjoined interests of the propertied classes. Like Penn, the assembly was also dominated by conservatives because of the coalition among German, Quaker and commercial powers headed by Joseph Galloway. Ultra-conservatism gradually gave way to more moderate political positions in Philadelphia. This was represented in the replacement in the assembly of Speaker Galloway by Edward Biddle in the fall of 1774, just one month before Paine's arrival. Furthermore, James Wilson, Galloway's strongest vocal opponent, gained much popular support after the October, 1774 election.⁹

Another example of assembly political moderation was their approval of English non-importation, which the Continental Congress had urged. This policy of moderation was followed in Philadelphia until well into 1776.¹⁰ It was this type of political atmosphere which Paine found in Philadelphia when he arrived near the start of 1775. The political feeling was moderate, but still tended more toward conservatism than to radicalism.

⁹ Robert L. Brunhouse, The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1942), p. 11. The reader may gain the false impression that James Wilson was a true revolutionist since he vehemently opposed the conservative Galloway. The truth of this matter is brought out when one realizes the same Wilson was later branded a tory by those revolutionists concerned about freedom from England.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

Paine was definitely not the person to come up with completely original ideas. He, like many good politicians and political writers, carefully considered which way the people were marching and quickly ran around them to get in front, pretending to lead. Throughout his life and writings, Paine seemed to be a radical politician because he was always pointing out corruption in the traditional system and recommending his own panaceas.

Paine's reaction to Philadelphia society in 1775 led him to write articles on social reform because the people were not quite ready for political reform.

Paine's March 8, 1775 article attacking Negro slavery won him the respect of several influential Americans including Benjamin Rush.¹¹ Rush paid a visit to Aitken's bookstore. In the words of Rush, "I met with Mr. Paine, and was introduced to him by Mr. Aitken. His conversation became at once interesting. I asked him to visit me, which he did a few days afterwards."¹²

Undoubtedly, Paine and Rush discussed many of the principles of Paine's article. Just three years before Rush had also published an attack on slavery. Paine's attack, however, was more radical, for Rush had been careful not to

¹¹ Nelson F. Adkins, (ed.), Common Sense and Other Political Writings (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. vii.

¹² Corner, Autobiography of Rush, p. 113.

advocate the complete abolition of slavery.¹³ Nevertheless, Rush must have admired such Paine statements as:

That some desperate wretches should be willing to steal and enslave men by violence and murder for gain, is rather lamentable than strange. . . . Certainly one may, with as much reason and decency, plead for murder, robbery, lewdness, and barbarity, as for this practice. . . .¹⁴

In another of Paine's early American articles, the essay on duelling, his typical sarcasm was employed to make his point:

With respect to the practicability of this scheme (duelling), we apprehend that the great difficulty would lie in obliging the quarrelling parties, or either of them (who by the author's plan are merely empowered), to refer the matter to a court of honour. But the writer does not give this as a finished plan: he barely suggests the hint; leaving others to improve upon it, if thought worthy of farther consideration.¹⁵

Paine went on to suggest that if the courts would give the death penalty to surviving duellists, the problem of future duelling would take care of itself. This suggestion found favor with many conservatives as well as radicals.

By the middle of 1775 Paine's all-social critiques gave way to some political writing. For example, in the Pennsylvania Magazine for June, 1775, Paine anticipated what turned out to be a twentieth-century problem, that of the balance of power among nations. The article he wrote was entitled "Thought on Defensive War," and the following statement in it could be attributed to a twentieth-century politician as well as to Paine:

¹³Conway, Writings of Paine, I, p. 2.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 5-7.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 44.

The balance of power is the scale of peace. The same balance would be preserved were all the world destitute of arms, for all would be alike; but since some will not, others dare not lay them aside. And while a single nation refuses to lay them down, it is proper that all should keep them up. Horrid misproportion mischief would ensue were one half the world deprived of the use of them; for while avarice and ambition have a place in the heart of man, the weak will become a prey to the strong. The history of every age and nation establishes these truths, and facts need but little arguments when they prove themselves.¹⁶

Paine made a bid for equal political and legal rights for women in the August issue of the Pennsylvania Magazine. By October Paine's writing emphasis switched from his typical sarcastic approaches to current social issues. He now gave serious attention to the current political problems. In the October issue of his magazine he wrote "A Serious Thought," which was the earliest anticipation of the Declaration of Independence written in the colonies. Paine asserted:

When I reflect on the horrid cruelties exercised by Britain in the East Indies. . . How religion and every manly principle of honour and honesty were sacrificed to luxury and pride. . . . And when I reflect on the use she hath made of the discovery of this new world. . . I hesitate not for a moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain. Call it Independence or what you will, if it is the cause of God and humanity it will go on.¹⁷

As it turned out, "A Serious Thought" was merely the beginning of Paine's written intervention into American political affairs. It is certain that further efforts in this

¹⁶Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 65-66.

political direction were urged upon Paine by Benjamin Rush. In his autobiography Rush records a meeting with Paine in which the political idea of independence came up:

I perceived with pleasure that he [Paine] had realized the independence of the American colonies upon Great Britain, and that he considered the measure as necessary to bring the war to a speedy and successful issue. I had before this interview put some thoughts upon paper upon this subject, and was preparing an address to the inhabitants of the colonies upon it. But I had hesitated as to the time, and I shuddered at the prospect of the consequence of its not being well received. I mentioned the subject to Mr. Paine, and asked him what he thought of writing a pamphlet upon it. I suggested to him that he had nothing to fear from the popular odium to which such a publication might expose him, for he could live anywhere, but that my profession and connections, which tied me to Philadelphia, where a great majority of the citizens and my friends were hostile to a separation of our country from Great Britain, forbade me to come forward as a pioneer in that important controversy. He readily assented to the proposal. . . .¹⁸

With the thought of independence planted in his mind, Paine spent most of the winter months during 1775 piecing together a pamphlet to Americans concerning their situation with their mother country. John Adams later stated that Paine collected this information for his pamphlet by snooping around among members of the Continental Congress, who were meeting in Philadelphia. According to Adams, Paine listened closely to their views of independence.¹⁹

Paine published his pamphlet on independence, calling it Common Sense, on January 10, 1776. Forty-seven pages in

¹⁸Corner, Autobiography of Rush, p. 114.

¹⁹Charles F. Adams, (ed.), The Life and Works of John Adams, II (Boston: Little and Brown, 1850), p. 507.

length, it was published anonymously in Philadelphia by Robert Bell, a bookseller on Philadelphia's Third Street, and sold for two shillings. Rush said that he recommended Bell to Paine since Bell was "an open friend to independence."²⁰

Benjamin Rush also suggested the title of the pamphlet to Paine, who originally intended to call it Plain Truth. "I gave at his request the title of Common Sense," said Rush.²¹ John Adams' diary has substantiated the fact that Rush inspired Paine's article and title. Adams recorded that "Dr. Rush put him upon writing on the subject, furnished him with the arguments which had been urged in Congress a hundred times, and gave his title of Common Sense."²²

The sale of Common Sense went so well that Bell issued a second edition on the 29th of January, 1776. Paine became irritated at Bell because this edition was printed without his permission, but what made Paine even more angry was that Bell had not given him that part of the profit which was rightfully his, a sum approaching forty-five pounds. Paine had planned to devote half of this money to the purchase of mittens for the Pennsylvania troops ordered to Canada.²³ Because of these trying circumstances, Paine granted permission to William and Thomas

²⁰Corner, Autobiography of Rush, p. 114.

²¹Ibid.

²²Adams, Works, II, p. 507.

²³Scharf, History of Philadelphia, I, p. 309.

Bradford to publish his revised and corrected edition of Common Sense.²⁴ History accepts this revised edition as the author's final version.²⁵

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵It is this revised edition which is referred to in this thesis.

CHAPTER IV

COMMON SENSE

This chapter is divided into two parts. The political theories of Common Sense are analyzed in the beginning section. The social and political reactions of the American people to the political theories of Common Sense are described in part two, which is also concerned with the propoganda value of Common Sense.

I. Political Theories

Thomas Paine, like all political theorists, was concerned with the relation of man, society, and government. The first work that Paine presented on this relationship was Common Sense. It was not Paine's best dissertation of political thought--The Age of Reason deserves this claim--but it was his first. This section therefore treats Paine's political thinking in Common Sense as his beginning philosophy of government, not as his finalized one.

Paine said nothing which was new to the political theorists of his day. However, he was one of those unique individuals who caught the spirit of the prevailing intellectual political theories and translated them into the common tongue. He gave some of the theories a new interpretation and specifically applied them to the American situation. He was

a practical political theorist who did not hesitate to apply that which he believed. Thus it is no discredit to him that his views in Common Sense were not highly original, for he embodied the reasonableness of the political theories of his day in the clear and meaningful language of the common colonist.

The introduction to Common Sense clarifies Paine's political stand. It at once becomes clear that he was foremost a radical because he was calling for a definite change in the makeup of America. Like most radical political theorists, he envisioned the change as the start of a worldwide movement. He first stated this belief in the introduction: "The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind."¹ Later, in the appendix, he returned to the point by giving the American cause a certain religious note:

A situation similar to the present has not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the event of a few months. The reflection is awful, and in this point of view how trifling, how ridiculous do the men appear when weighed against the business of a world.²

Paine began the text of Common Sense by treating that traditional distinction between society and state. Paine's first few pages make a sharp distinction between the social and political orders. The two not only have different values, but

¹Adkins, Common Sense and Other Political Writings, p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 51.

different foundations. To Paine, society is produced by the people's wants, while government is the result of their wickedness. Government is created because of the defect of moral virtue, and is only a necessary evil.

Paine arrived at his conclusions regarding the design of government through the simple voice of reason and nature.³ Nature should provide the principles because it is simple. And, "The more simple anything is, the less liable it is to be disordered and the easier repaired when disordered."⁴ It is obvious from the first few pages of Common Sense that Paine's political theory is taken from Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government. Locke believed that the state of nature is better than the worst government, but that the inconveniences of nature lead to the formation of a political society.⁵

Paine's first specific attack in Common Sense is directed at the English constitution. Its main fault was its complexities. It simply was too complicated to function properly. It was compounded of two ancient tyrannies, monarchy and aristocracy, with only some republican materials. Its basic downfall was that the first two, monarchy and aristocracy, did not derive from the people. Furthermore, the three divisions did not check each other. "To say that the constitution of England is

³Ibid., p. 6.

⁴Ibid., p. 7.

⁵John Locke, The Second Treatise of Civil Government, ed. J. W. Gough (New York: Macmillan Co., 1947), pp. 3-10.

a union of three powers, reciprocally checking each other, is farcical, either the words have no meaning or they are flat contradictions."⁶

A specific attack on monarchy follows Paine's general attack on the English constitution. He uses religious proof against the Crown. This proof of the absurdity of monarchy is not too convincing by either eighteenth or twentieth century standards. Paine gave a step-by-step Biblical account of how the children of Israel came to be influenced by the devil and soon afterward established the first Jewish monarchy:

Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry. The heathens paid divine honors to their deceased kings, and the Christian world has improved on the plan by doing the same to their living ones. . . . For the will of the Almighty as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings. . . . All anti-monarchical parts of scripture, have been very smoothly glossed over in monarchical governments, but they undoubtedly merit the attention of countries which have their governments yet to form. . . . Nearly three thousand years passed away, from the Mosiac account of the creation, till the Jews under a national delusion requested a king. . . . Kings they had none, and it was held sinful to acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of Hosts. . . . Monarchy is ranked in scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reverse is denounced against them.⁷

Religion was never more a part of a political theory than in this section of Common Sense.

⁶Adkins, Common Sense and Other Political Writings, p. 7.

⁷Ibid., p. 11.

The height of Paine's monarchy attack is centered in monarchy's by-product, hereditary succession. Paine stated:

To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second, claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and an imposition on posterity. For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever; and though himself might deserve some decent degree of honors of his co-temporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them. One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings is that nature disapproves it; otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion.⁸

Paine pointed out that he opposed the principle of monarchy. He maintained that monarchy could only have come about through the usurpation of power. In a lighter sense, kings are no good because they carry on very little business, and monarchy, therefore, is a waste of the people's money.

Paine next delved into the state of affairs in America. He essentially stated several arguments against the long established mercantile theory. First, he said that as long as the colonies were a part of the British Empire there could be no permanent reconciliation. The colonies would always be susceptible to sustaining material injury while a part of the Empire. Paine went so far as to deny that England ever helped America:

I have heard it asserted by some that, as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary toward her future happiness and will always

⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer roundly that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had anything to do with her. The commerce by which she has enriched herself are the necessaries of life and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.⁹

Furthermore, Paine preferred to believe that England "engrossed" the colonies, rather than protected them. Paine showed that the selfish motives of the mercantile theory had no reciprocity for America. He inferred that England's use of America as a defense base from which to fight her enemies had no benefit for Americans. Paine also stated that "she [England] did not protect us from our enemies on our account but from her enemies on her own account."¹⁰ Common Sense includes the thought that England is not the parent country from the standpoint of American inhabitants. "Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This New World has been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe."¹¹

Paine again turned to reason and nature to prove that reconciliation was a dream. "It is repugnant to reason, to

⁹Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 21.

the universal order of things, to all examples from former ages, to suppose that this continent can longer remain subject to any external power. . . Nature has deserted the connection."¹² Paine's argument was that Nature made the separation between England and America inevitable. Since this separation was going to occur, Paine next turned his attention to the problems which would beset the new country. He stated that an independent America must turn to a national form of government. This type of government was the only thing which Paine believed could keep peace and preserve the continent from future civil wars.¹³

The first half of Common Sense is a negatively written justification for American independence, with the author on the defensive. However, Paine became more constructive in the second half with his plan of government for the colonies. These views on the form of government for America constitute the most important political theory found in the pages of the pamphlet.

The best way of understanding the system of government Paine offered in Common Sense is to construct a verbal model. The following paragraphs fit the pieces of Paine's governmental thoughts from Common Sense into such a systematic model.

¹² Ibid., p. 25.

¹³ Ibid., p. 29.

All citizens in America would have suffrage rights, although it may be assumed Paine would have had a legal age limit for voting. Each colony would be divided into six to ten districts. Every district would chose representatives to send to a national Congress. Congress would consist of 390 representatives. There would be a unicameral government. Congress would pick one particular colony at random from which it would chose a president. This policy would be set up on a rotation basis, i.e., each colony would get its turn at having a president. All laws of the national government must be passed by a three-fifths majority vote of Congress.¹⁴

Paine did not want a strong president, even one elected by the people. Any such president might give the appearance of being a king. He would be elected by Congress from its own members and have as his only responsibility the job of presiding over the meetings of Congress. He definitely would not head a separate branch of government to check the power of Congress. Paine also failed to provide for a national judicial system. One may assume that he purposely left legal interpretation to the local courts. This would fit Paine's extreme democratic tendencies since local courts were believed to be closer to the people's will. The Congressmen would be elected for a period of one year. Emphasis would be placed on selecting as many citizens as possible for Congressmen. Paine made

¹⁴Ibid., p. 31.

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

domestic affairs the only business with which Congress would be concerned. He firmly believed in a policy of national isolation.

Common Sense calls for a constitutional convention to be attended by delegates in equal numbers from each colony. The product of their labor, a written constitution, would serve as a protection for the American people against possible corrupt Congressmen. The only king that Paine foresaw for America was her congressional law.¹⁵

Paine's views on government were not new. The views he recorded were those common to the thinking men of his time. They were a combined and simplified form of Locke, Rousseau and Montesquieu. The constitutional views of Common Sense closely resembled the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union which were adopted in 1781, five years after the publication of the booklet. America's first national government elected its representatives annually, was unicameral, and excluded the executive and judicial branches. Paine's plan of government is different from the Articles of Confederation in one important respect: it is not provincial in outlook. Paine's national union is to be sovereign over any individual colony.

The last pages of Common Sense give an optimistic account of America's abilities. Paine painted a bright picture to further his case that the time was right for independence.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 32.

First, he counted America's greatest strength as colonial unity.¹⁶ It was also advantageous that there be no debt when the government first went into operation; however, "no nation ought to be (long) without a debt" because "a national debt is a national bond."¹⁷ Alexander Hamilton later proved this theory of Paine's to be a wise one. Hamilton had the newly created federal government of 1789 assume the debts acquired by the individual states during the fight for independence. And one of Hamilton's main purposes was to weaken states' rights and strengthen the federal government by tying the states financially to the national bond as Paine had first suggested.

An interesting political theory which is advocated in the last pages of Common Sense is Paine's theory on commerce and naval power. Paine preceded by a hundred years, Alfred Thayer Mahan, the famous American sea power advocate. Paine's theory was that a strong navy was to the power and commercial advantage of a country. He stated:

No country on the globe is so happily situated or so internally capable of raising a fleet as America. Tar, timber, iron, and cordage are her natural produce. We need go abroad for nothing. Whereas the Dutch, who make large profits by hiring out their ships of war to the Spaniards and Portuguese, are obliged to import most of the materials they use. We ought to view the building a fleet as an article of commerce, it being the natural manufactory of this country. It is the best money we can lay out. A navy when finished is worth more than it cost. And is that nice point in

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

national policy in which commerce and protection are united. Let us build; if we want them not, we can sell; and by that means replace our paper currency with ready gold and silver.¹⁸

Paine's concluding remarks are perhaps his most important contribution to the American cause of independence. Paine believed that nothing could aid America's worldwide crusade for freedom like a political statement declaring independence from the British monarchy. Paine outlined four reasons for a declaration of independence: (1) no third power could mediate the war as long as America remained subject to the British Crown; (2) America could not expect foreign aid if she might reconcile herself with Britain; (3) a revolution for independence appears better than a civil war; and (4) commerce with other countries would increase.¹⁹ Paine, then, by the following statement became the first American to call formally for a written declaration of independence:

To conclude, however strange it may appear to some or however unwilling they may be to think so matters not, but many strong and striking reasons may be given to show that nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as an open and determined declaration for independence.²⁰

Thomas Paine included an eight-page appendix in the second and third editions of Common Sense which reaffirmed the reasons for declaring independence. The appendix thus became the resume of his pamphlet.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 43.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 43-44.

Paine asserted that the time is right for American independence, especially from a military point of view. Paine believed that these moments come but once to any nation and that they must be seized immediately if the advantage is to be taken. Paine believed that independence was closer to natural order than reconciliation because it was simpler and life should avoid complexities.

Before Paine left the subject of common sense, he answered those Americans who would return to 1763. He stated that Britain would never propose this and if she did, she could not be trusted to keep her word. Finally, Paine brought Common Sense to a conclusion with this appeal:

Independence is the only bond that can tie and keep us together. We shall then see our object, and our ears will be legally shut against the schemes of an intriguing as well as a cruel enemy. We shall then, too, be on a proper footing to treat with Britain; for there is reason to conclude that the pride of that court will be less hurt by treating with the American states for terms of peace than with those whom she denominates "rebellious subjects" for terms of accommodation. It is our delaying it that encourages her to hope for conquest, and our backwardness tends only to prolong the war.²¹

II. American Reaction

Common Sense became the arsenal to which most colonists referred for their argumentative weapons. And, like radical propagandists before him, Paine raised the struggle between the mother country and the colonies above the temporal, in

²¹Ibid., pp. 51-52.

this case, taxation. His appeal was to the ideal, i.e., a democratic-republican form of government. The theories of Paine in Common Sense became, to many, like words spoken by the Almighty. Moreover, Common Sense enabled the people of America to understand the object of independence. This was the impetus Americans had needed and wanted.

It is an accepted historical fact that Common Sense influenced people toward independence. Paine combined the right mixtures of abstract political theory and practical realism in order to accomplish this end. He caught people's attention with his intoxicating idealism and attack on England's monarchy.

Paine wrote Common Sense because of his belief in the American revolutionary cause as the cause for all mankind. He also wrote it because he was a rebel at heart. He believed that the essence of his own reason was to point out needed changes.²² Paine hated the control, restraint, and convention which had been imposed on him in England and wanted personally to see them overthrown. America offered him a chance to realize significant social and political changes. C. E. Merriam has gone so far as to suggest that because Paine was possessed with the personal thought of rebellion against England, Common

²² Gamaliel Bradford, "Damaged Souls," Harper's Magazine, (February, 1923), p. 369.

Sense may not have expressed his true political theories.²³

However, Paine's early, if not his lifetime, political theories were exemplified by the booklet.

Paine felt compelled to point out the absurdities of the English government. Monarchy's downfall and independence were more than personal battle cries for him. In fact, Paine did not stop with these seemingly rebellious acts, but outlined his plan for a representative democracy. He saw America as only a first step in a worldwide trend toward democracy. He was concerned with much more than revenge against England, although that, too, was a part of Paine.

Thomas Paine has been characterized as a rebel and a propagandist because of his style of writing. Paine never wrote formally; although he wrote well. The sentences of Common Sense are neat and simple. They are free from inversions and very brief. Paine's rhetoric is centered on epithet, not sentence structure. He sometimes became theatrical in his writing. He had the ability to coin quotable phrases. Paine held power over the crowds through his ability to be both complimentary and bitterly irritating at the same time.

Common Sense succeeds in being interesting, heart throbbing, and nefarious. It has no ironical humor, but is filled with all kinds of apt anecdotes. While Paine was ignorant of grammar, he was a master of words. His diction was

²³Howard Penniman, "Thomas Paine-Democrat," American Political Science Review, XXXVII (April, 1943), p. 244.

clear and direct. His secret forte was the rhythm of his phrases. They were snappy and vigorous. America was thus moved during the Revolutionary Era by a pamphlet extremely readable and appealing to the emotions.

Paine's style of writing in Common Sense caused the people of America to think, not necessarily to contemplate, and to organize their thoughts in a particular direction. The action which came about as a result of their thinking is a compliment not only to Paine, but to the revolutionary spirit of the American common man of 1776.

The effect of Common Sense on the American people was much the same in every section of the country. However, because the background of each section varied, Common Sense attained differing degrees of influence. For example, Virginia was truly the Old Dominion, having the longest established ties with Great Britain. As late as August, 1775, the Virginia Convention declared: "We again and for all, publicly and solemnly declare, before God and the world, that we do bear faith and true allegiance to his Majesty George the Third, our only lawful and rightful King."²⁴

Shortly after the first issues of Common Sense were received in Virginia in 1776, a decided change in ideas was seen in that colony. These changes cannot completely be

²⁴Thomas J. Wertenbaker, Give Me Liberty (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1958), p. 254.

credited to Common Sense, but Paine deserves at least a share of the credit. George Washington wrote to Joseph Reed on January 31, 1776, "A few more of such flaming arguments as were exhibited at Falmouth and Norfolk, added to the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet Common Sense, will not leave numbers at a loss to decide upon the propriety of separation."²⁵

On April 1, 1776, George Washington again wrote Joseph Reed: "By private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find that Common Sense is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men."²⁶ Indeed, the minds of Virginia had been changed for the Virginia convention of May 6, 1776, formally approved the idea of independence.²⁷

Pennsylvania and the middle colonies were least influenced by the publication of Common Sense because they had suffered fewer direct animosities at the hands of the British. As conditions worsened, however, Common Sense was given more and more attention.

All Philadelphians became aware of the publication of the pamphlet Common Sense, although it took them longer to recognize its author. Each edition of the pamphlet was widely

²⁵ Worthington C. Ford, (ed.), The Writings of George Washington, III (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), p. 396.

²⁶ Ibid., IV, p. 4.

²⁷ Wertebaker, Give Me Liberty, pp. 255-256.

advertised in newspapers, taverns and public resorts. A measure of its popularity in Pennsylvania was the newspaper replies to it, both pro and con. John Adams was one of the first to write against it. Adams' recollection of Common Sense in his autobiography best describes his mixed emotions:

In the course of this winter (1775-76) appeared a phenomenon in Philadelphia, a disastrous meteor, I mean Thomas Paine. . . in the latter part of winter he came out with his pamphlet. The arguments in favor of independence I liked very well; but one third part of the book was filled with arguments, from the Old Testament, to prove the unlawfulness of monarchy. . . his arguments from the Old Testament were ridiculous . . . the other third part, relative to a form of government, I considered as flowing from simple ignorance. . . I dreaded the effect so popular a pamphlet might have among the people, and determined to do all in my power to counteract the effect of it.²⁸

One negative newspaper reply was signed "Candidus" and was dedicated to John Dickinson. Other newspaper replies were signed "Rationalis" and "Cato." During the months of February, March and April, 1776, nearly every edition of the Pennsylvania Evening Post had some article traceable to the independence views of Common Sense.²⁹

The controversy of conservative reconciliation versus radical independence which Common Sense articulated soon began taking shape in the province of Pennsylvania. Finally, after a long period of sifting and willowing, the conservative-moderates of the State gave way to more radical members. On

²⁸Charles F. Adams, (ed.), The Works of John Adams, II (Boston: Little and Brown, 1850), pp. 506-507.

²⁹Scharf, History of Philadelphia, I, p. 310.

June 24, 1776, the Conference of Pennsylvania³⁰ declared their willingness to concur in a vote of the Continental Congress declaring the united colonies free and independent States.³¹

Pennsylvania was the battle-ground of conflicting opinions. The question of independence had nowhere been so actively debated by the press. Common Sense aided greatly those radical leaders who were for independence. But the opposition was strong because it included moderates such as Morris, Dickinson and Charles Thomson. That Common Sense survived at all in Pennsylvania may be a measure of its influence on the people of that colony.

Throughout Massachusetts and the rest of New England, Common Sense arrived almost too late to effect the minds of many men. Actual fighting had already become a way of life by January, 1776. Opinion had traveled far from the day of Lexington and Concord and the word "republic" was no longer a frightening term. In fact most towns were in the process of passing resolutions for independence.³² Certainly Common Sense had no trouble finding approval.

³⁰A provincial conference of committees was held in Philadelphia beginning on June 18, 1776. This conference met at the request of John Adams and the Second Continental Congress to supplant the existing colonial government. Congress believed the old oaths supporting the Crown of Great Britain were not consistent with measures it had already taken. At this meeting, Pennsylvania approved the recommendation of Congress.

³¹Scharf, History of Philadelphia, I, p. 315.

³²Lee N. Newcomer, The Embattled Farmers (New York: King's Crown Press, 1953), p. 97.

Common Sense helped the people of Massachusetts formalize the logic of the situation they found themselves caught in with the British troops. Many of the lesser leaders among the radicals were continually writing and speaking out for independence in the first few months of 1776. One such lay leader was Joseph Hawley of Northampton, Massachusetts, who seemingly received his inspiration from Paine. On February 18, 1776, he wrote a letter to Elbridge Gerry, part of which read:

I beg leave to let you know that I have read the pamphlet entitled, "Common Sense, addressed to the Inhabitants of America," and that every sentiment has sunk into my well-prepared heart; in short, you know that my heart before was like good ground well prepared for good seed; and without an American independent Supreme Government and Constitution wisely devised and designed, well established and settled, we shall always be but a rope of sand; but, that well done, invincible.³³

Common Sense contributed to the cause of independence in all other colonies as well as these mentioned as being representative. The ideas and concepts of Common Sense seemed apropos to the situation immediately at hand in the colonies. Therefore, one may assert that at this time Puritan New Englanders, proprietary leaders, and Southern slaveholders were united and had little compunction about using the simple vigor of Paine's rhetoric to further their own colony's cause.

The intellectual leaders of the colonies compose a group whose reactions to Common Sense must be dealt with. The

³³Peter Force, (ed.), American Archives, fourth series, IV (Washington: St. Clair Clarke and Force, 1843), pp. 1190-1191.

person of renown more closely concerned with Paine than all others was Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush took pride in the fact that he had coached Paine into writing the pamphlet. After its publication, Rush recorded these views about its acceptance in the colonies:

Its effects were sudden and extensive upon the American mind. It was read by public men, repeated in clubs, spouted in Schools, and in one instance delivered from the pulpit instead of a sermon by a clergyman in Connecticut. . . the controversy about independence was carried into the newspapers, in which I bore a part. . . I was actuated by the double motives of the safety of my country, and a predilection to a Republican form of government. . . .³⁴

In a letter to George Washington from General Charles Lee on January 24, 1776, mention was made of Common Sense:

Have you seen the pamphlet Common Sense? I never saw such a masterly, irresistable performance. It will, if I mistake not, in concurrence with the transcendent folly and wickedness of the Ministry, give the coup-de-grace to Great Britain. In short, I own myself convinced, by the arguments, of the necessity of separation.³⁵

Delegates to the Continental Congress sent innumerable copies back home. Francis Lightfoot Lee sent a copy to Landon Carter, who was known to have opposed independence. He also sent copies of Common Sense to Colonel Francis Taylor for distribution.³⁶ Charleston received its first copy when Christopher Gadsden brought a copy with him upon his return from

³⁴Corner, The Autobiography of Rush, pp. 114-115.

³⁵Force, American Archives, fourth series, IV, p. 839.

³⁶Philip Davidson, Propaganda and The American Revolution 1763-1783 (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), p. 215.

Philadelphia early in February, 1776.³⁷ One of the North Carolina delegates, Joseph Hewes, decided against sending large quantities of the pamphlet for distribution in his home state, but did include a copy with his letter to Samuel Johnston on February 11, 1776.³⁸ Common Sense was sent to the North Carolina back country by another delegate from that colony, John Penn.³⁹ Many of these delegates used Common Sense as a barometer in gaging public opinion.

The pamphlet had drastic influences on the common American citizen. As far as its influence was concerned, Common Sense was in a class all its own. In this vein, it was the best piece of propaganda produced during the Revolutionary period.⁴⁰

The newspapers of Philadelphia serve as the best opinion-measuring device. All newspapers pointed out the influence of Common Sense on the common American citizen. The Constitutional Gazette of February 24, 1776 reported that the "pamphlet entitled Common Sense is indeed a wonderful production. It is completely calculated for the meridian of North America."⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Edmund C. Burnett, Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, I (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1921), p. 344.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 349.

⁴⁰ Davidson, Propaganda of the American Revolution, pp. 13-15.

⁴¹ Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 36.

The Pennsylvania Evening Post of March 17, 1776 asserted that "Common Sense hath made independents of the majority of the country."⁴² "Common Sense is read by all ranks, and as many read, so many become converted," stated Almon's Remembrancer For 1776, "Common Sense has converted thousands to Independence who could not endure the idea before."⁴³

The most numerous of all colonial Americans was the small farmer class. Paine influenced them with his masterpiece of propaganda. His attack on the King had great popularity among the frontiersmen.⁴⁴ Naturally, among these democratically inclined classes, this "independence for a democratic republic" appeal took firm root. After the appearance of the pamphlet "middle and lower class Americans shed their colonial loyalties like a last year's garmet, and thenceforth they regarded the pretensions of kings as little better than flummery."⁴⁵ Common Sense may not have started the revolution in America, but because it swayed the masses, it did much to end it favorably for Americans.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., p. 37. Almon's Remembrancer was a magazine circulated in both England and America between the years 1773 and 1781. It was mainly concerned with items on the American independence issue and was published monthly by John Almon in London. The best published article exemplifying an individual's conversion to independence because of Common Sense appears as a letter from a reader in New Jersey signed "Essex" on February 26, 1776 and may be found in Force's American Archives, fourth series, IV, pp. 1496-1498.

⁴⁴Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, I (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927), p. 330.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Tory reaction to Common Sense was anything but pleasant, as one might expect. Sam Adams stated mildly, "It has fretted some folks here (Boston) more than a little."⁴⁶ One American historian put it this way:

Gentlemen who had gingerly talked of independence with trusted friends behind closed doors now found a reckless spirit blustering forth with the idea in print. Genteel minds reacted to it as to a piece of bawdy house pornography—they read it, fascinated, finished it in disgust.⁴⁷

Common Sense obviously was a most influential pamphlet. Its propaganda value during its own time was much more important than its philosophical value. One of Paine's biographers exclaimed, "To it the American people owe their independence."⁴⁸ If they do, it is because of Paine, the propagandist and not Paine, the intellectual philosopher. Paine was an idealist and his appeal to idealism, i.e., independence and democracy, was the main propaganda weapon of Common Sense.

Paine transposed many of the ideas of the Continental Congress. Common Sense gave the bell of independence a new and popular ring which Congress probably could not have done. Paine had translated the great political ideas in such a manner that all literate colonists could easily understand the ideas of Congress through his writing.

⁴⁶David Hawke, In The Midst of a Revolution (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), p. 90.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 31.

THE AGE OF PAINE

The success of the pamphlet Common Sense was amazing. Almost 500,000 copies were sold within the first year of publication. Paine's fame became widespread as a result of Common Sense. One Revolutionary historian, because of the impact of Common Sense, refers to this time period as "the Age of Paine."¹ The purpose of this chapter is to show Paine as he really was during his own "Age," and specifically, to show that Common Sense was his stepstone to political achievement.

Although Paine was primarily concerned with defending Common Sense from newspaper attacks in 1776, he took part in framing the Pennsylvania constitution. He did not draw up the constitution, but his ideas directly influenced those men who did. All of Paine's biographers attribute much credit for the constitution to him. Most Revolutionary historians also place Paine's name along with Benjamin Franklin and James Cannon as one of the direct co-framers of Pennsylvania's constitution of 1776.² However, Paine stated in an address "to

¹Hawke, In The Midst of a Revolution, p. 183.

²John C. Miller is typical of those Revolutionary historians who give Paine full credit for being an active co-framer of the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776. See Origins of the American Revolution (Boston: Little Brown, 1943), p. 504.

the people" on March 18, 1777, in the Pennsylvania Packet that, "I had no hand in forming any part of it [Pennsylvania constitution], nor knew anything of its contents till I saw it published."³

The reason many historians have given Paine so much credit in framing Pennsylvania's constitution of 1776 is that it was based on many of his "radical" views in Common Sense. It was a republican constitution whose victory could be attributed to a coalition of western farmers and Philadelphia artisans. The constitution provided for manhood suffrage, an annually elected unicameral legislature, and a plural executive which could never take authority from the all-powerful assembly.⁴ Clearly, the majority ruled under the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776.

In August, 1776, Paine renounced what trace remained of his Quaker principles and joined the army. His enlistment in the Pennsylvania division headed by General Roberdeau lasted only about a month. In September he renewed his enlistment at Fort Lee on the Hudson and served under General Nathaniel Green until January, 1777, having seen action at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton. In fact, Paine inspired the men in these battles with his first "American Crisis" paper which was read to the men by General Washington. In the mood of Common Sense, Paine wrote on a drumhead by campfire:

³Foner, Complete Writings of Paine, II, p. 270.

⁴Brunhouse, Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, pp. 18-38.

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.⁵

Although Paine was officially out of the Continental Army by January 21, 1777, his patriotic spirit continued with the fighting men to the end of the war, and he continued to write additional "American Crisis" papers until 1783.⁶

On January 21, 1777, Paine was appointed by the Congressional Council of Safety as secretary to a commission sent to make a treaty with the Indians in Pennsylvania. There is no doubt that he received this assignment because of his renown as the author of Common Sense. His writing ability impressed many Congressmen, and he was judged as the best person to write the commissioners' report. He was paid 300 pounds for this service.⁷

Two days before Paine wrote "Crisis III" on April 19, 1777, he was appointed secretary of the Congressional Committee of Foreign Affairs. He did much in this capacity to aid his country. He kept the American representatives abroad informed of the state of affairs at home.⁸ Paine in this position also

⁵Foner, Complete Writings of Paine, I, p. 50.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Van der Seyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 42.

⁸A typical letter from Paine to an overseas official is the one written to William Bingham at Martinique which can be found in Van der Weyde's Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 45.

kept many other officials in government service informed of foreign affairs proceedings. This is evidenced from his many letters to Richard Lee, George Washington and Henry Laurens. In his capacity as secretary Paine must truly have found himself. On October 24, 1778, Paine wrote to Franklin in Paris that he had "the pleasure of being respected and I feel a little of that satisfactory kind of pride that tells me I have some right to it."⁹

A month after this letter was written, Paine unfortunately became involved in a controversy with Silas Deane over French aid to the colonies. This abruptly brought his elation to an end and caused him much personal torment. The debate between Paine and Deane centered on the question of French aid to America before the Franco-American alliance of 1778. Paine accused Deane of attempting a fraud on America. Although Paine ultimately proved Deane in the wrong, both men lost their jobs.

The controversy had started in 1775 when the French foreign minister, Vergennes, decided that the time was right to aid America against England. The aid was to be kept secret for political purposes. Therefore, a secret company was set up under Caron de Beaumarchais, a trusted French agent.¹⁰ On

⁹Dixon Wecter, "Thomas Paine and the Franklins," American Literature, XII (November, 1940), p. 313.

¹⁰Beaumarchais was the son of a watchmaker, a self-made man who possessed high intellect, comeliness, wit and charm. He is best remembered as the author of two of the most popular comedies of his day, The Barber of Seville and The Marriage of Figaro. Unfortunately, honesty did not seem to be one of his virtues.

May 2, 1776, one million livres was turned over to Beaumarchais.¹¹ He set up a fictitious private company called Roderique Hortalez and Company which used the money to purchase and send military aid to America. Beaumarchais bought French powder magazines for four sous per pound and shipped them to America on the basis of twenty sous per pound, making a nice profit for himself.¹² He made these transactions with Arthur Lee, the secret agent of Congress in London. Beaumarchais stressed the idea that this was a gift, but later insisted on tobacco payments from America to make the entire scheme appear as a commercial transaction.¹³ This Lee reported to the Foreign Affairs Committee of Congress, which agreed to the transaction in good faith. Congress little suspected that it might have to pay twenty sous a pound for gunpowder which cost only four.

This French aid transaction took place in June, 1776, one month before Silas Deane arrived in France. When Deane arrived in July he met with Beaumarchais and made the mistake of proudly claiming himself responsible for the entire aid transaction. Furthermore, Deane borrowed money for personal reasons from Beaumarchais and became indebted to him. When Beaumarchais presented a claim to Congress for payment of the bill, Deane signed the statement which made the French gift to

¹¹John R. Alden, The American Revolution, 1775-1783 (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 182.

¹²Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 67.

¹³Ibid.

America now appear to be more officially a loan. Before all this transpired, Arthur Lee had discovered that the aid was to have been a free gift from the French government and so informed Deane.

The other commissioners to France (Franklin and Lee) wrote a note to Congress in October, 1777, explaining that the aid had a "no repayment ever" stipulation from the French government. In the early part of 1778 when Beaumarchais' claim reached Congress, Silas Deane was recalled. Paine was so shocked that anyone would become so unpatriotic toward the "cause of all mankind" as to stoop to embezzlement that he carried this scandal to the American people through the press. The Paine-Deane affair thus became much heated.

Paine published a short notice in the Pennsylvania Packet of January 2, 1779, which exposed Deane fully to the public:

If Mr. Deane or any other gentleman will procure an order from Congress to inspect an account in my office, or any of Mr. Deane's friends in Congress will take the trouble of coming themselves, I will give him or them my attendance, and show them in handwriting which Mr. Deane is well acquainted with, that the supplies he so pompously plumes himself upon were promised and engaged, and that as a present, before he ever arrived in France; and the part that fell to Mr. Deane was only to see it done, and how he has performed that service the public are acquainted with.¹⁴

The reason Paine published the notice in the first place is best expressed by him in a letter to Henry Laurens. Paine

¹⁴Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 73.

carefully explained that he wanted to prevent the enemy from drawing any unjust conclusions from an accidental division in the House over this matter. Another reason was to set the minds of the people at ease concerning Deane.¹⁵

Paine's public attack on Deane had brought public answers from Deane's followers. The January 2, 1779 letter quoted above offered proof that Paine was right about Deane, but in doing so, Paine alluded to secret documents in his possession as secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs.¹⁶

Paine not only exposed Deane, but unmeaningly exposed the nation's negotiations with France. The French minister Gerard had to demand that Congress disavow Paine's statements. Congress consented, even though every member knew Paine was completely correct in his assessment of the whole affair. Congress asserted that the United States had received no aid whatever from France before signing the Franco-American alliance. To carry this face-saving operation, Paine had to be called to account by the Congress. Paine had no opportunity to get his case officially before Congress because his friend Henry Laurens had resigned as president of Congress in December, 1778 and was replaced by John Jay, who was a Deane supporter. Therefore, on January 7, 1779, Paine resigned his position as secretary to the Committee of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁵Conway, Life of Paine, I, p. 125.

¹⁶All of Paine's articles and letters on the Deane affair appear in the second volume of Foner's Complete Writings of Paine.

Thomas Paine was probably aiming for bigger promoters than Silas Deane. He seemed to be trying to expose Robert Morris, a wealthy Philadelphia merchant and profiteer. Paine believed that Morris was the guiding spirit of the organization which wanted to turn the American Revolution into a huge "stock-profiteering" operation.¹⁷ Indeed, there is evidence to suppose Paine was right. Thomas P. Abernathy uncovered several letters between Deane and Morris which indicate that they had more in mind than the good of their country with their commercial transactions.¹⁸

What started out as a debate over the role of an American commissioner to France rapidly developed into a struggle between radicals and conservatives in Pennsylvania. Wealthy merchants for months had been organizing to overthrow the democratic state constitution of 1776 which Paine supported. He aided the city artisans and mechanics by writing articles to the press in defense of the constitution.

The Constitutionals won a resounding victory on election day, October 12, 1779. Paine was given an appointment as clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly in November. Once again, the spirit of Common Sense placed him in a position of high office. The new Assemblymen had rewarded Paine because of his political viewpoints.¹⁹

¹⁷John C. Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 1775-1783 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), p. 373.

¹⁸Thomas P. Abernathy, "Commercial Activities of Silas Deane in France," American Historical Review, XXXIX (April, 1934), p. 477.

¹⁹Foner, Complete Writings of Paine, I, p. xviii.

Paine's most important accomplishment as clerk was his writing of the "Preamble to the Act Passed by the Pennsylvania Assembly March 1, 1780." This act provided for the gradual emancipation of Negro slaves. It was the first legislative measure passed in America for the emancipation of slaves.²⁰

In May, 1780, Paine made his most dramatic move before the Assembly. He drew 500 dollars on the salary which was due him and donated it to the cause of the American troops. This was done on the Assembly floor immediately after he had read a plea from General Washington for material support in the form of food, clothing and back pay. Paine's donation was combined with other donations to establish the Bank of Pennsylvania to supply the army with the needed provisions.²¹

If Paine had lost the popularity he had once held as author of Common Sense by the indirect censure by Congress, he more than regained it by the above mentioned acts. The University of the State of Pennsylvania conferred on him on July 4, 1780, the degree of Master of Arts.²²

Paine resigned his position as Assembly clerk in November, 1780, with the intention of writing a history of the American Revolutionary War. His history of the war was never written because he immediately became involved in other important

²⁰Ibid., p. xix.

²¹Conway, Life of Paine, I, pp. 156-160.

²²Ibid., p. 161.

adventures. On June 1, 1781, Paine sailed with John Laurens to France. They had been requested by Congress to seek additional military aid to continue the war. Although Paine must have played a prominent role in this mission, he received neither acknowledgement nor compensation for his time and effort.²³

Paine found himself in severe financial troubles when the end of active fighting came to America in 1781. His distressing financial situation was a result of giving everything to the patriot cause and keeping nothing for himself. Congress proposed giving Paine a \$6000 memorial gift, but reduced it to \$3000 to compromise with his enemies who still occupied seats in Congress. Paine was really saved by the State of New York which presented him a farm of three hundred acres. New York presented this confiscated Loyalist farm at New Rochelle to Paine because "his literary works. . . inspired the citizens of this state with unanimity, confirmed their confidence in. . . their cause and have ultimately contributed to the freedom, sovereignty, and independence of the United States."²⁴ Pennsylvania also relieved Paine's pecuniary worries by granting him 500 pounds.²⁵

²³ Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, pp. 116-123.

²⁴ Foner, Complete Writings of Paine, I, p. xxiii.

²⁵ Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 149.

Thomas Paine moved to his newly acquired farm in the summer of 1784 and remained there and in Bordentown, New Jersey, until 1787. There his mind took a natural bent toward science. He devoted most of his time to the invention of an iron bridge without piers and to a smokeless candle. But his thoughts were not entirely on science during these days. One of Paine's letters to Benjamin Franklin at this time is characterized by a yearning to visit Europe.²⁶

This temperamental restlessness got the best of him in April, 1787, when he sailed for France and England. He intended to spend only a year there, promoting his bridge invention and visiting his parents.²⁷ Instead, he passed fifteen years there. Thus Paine brought to a close his first extended visit to America.

²⁶This letter is dated March 31, 1787 and may be found in Foner's Complete Writings of Paine, II, p. 1260.

²⁷Van der Weyde, Life and Works of Paine, I, p. 167.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was originally begun because it was believed that Thomas Paine and his writing best exemplified the feeling of the average American during the American Revolution. Paine's Common Sense also lends itself to a study combining the three disciplines of history, literature, and political science. Paine, himself, succeeded in combining the three disciplines. He became famous because he knew history, combined it with logical political thinking (at least, to most Americans of this time), and presented it through some of the best romantic literature written.

The purpose of this study has been to show that the writing of Common Sense was the most important event in Thomas Paine's life. The timely publication of this pamphlet brought him instantaneous publicity, and the favorable public reaction marked a definite turning point in his life. Prior to coming to Philadelphia in the late fall of 1774, Paine had achieved little in the way of financial, political, or social success.

The early chapters are concerned with the events which provided Paine with an insight into the problems of the mass of the British people. This thesis emphasizes that Paine's personal experience in England affected him to such a degree that monarchy in general and the British government in particular were anathema to him.

In Chapter Four, the outward manifestations of Common Sense give way to an analysis of the subject matter which makes up the pages of Paine's book. Authors have been prone to slight Paine's background as an influence in Common Sense, and have neglected to construct and outline his model for constitutional government. Hopefully, this study has made constructive contributions in these areas.

The thesis resumes its study of the author by analyzing the various reactions to Paine's work. Paine must have been quite amazed at his degree of accomplishment and acceptance. Paine had come far in fortune since those excise days in England. He found himself in America's best company and highest social level. This was one of the results of Common Sense. Paine's first book gave him a political base in Pennsylvania and United States political affairs, a base which assured his future political and literary career.

This thesis may help make Paine better understood in the nuclear age. It has emphasized the importance of an individual's past personal psychological meaning for any written work like Common Sense. Twentieth century extremist writing may be better understood after a study of one of America's first extremists, Paine. A study of Paine's book indicates that there is certainly an American heritage which is liberal and reformist in nature. Yet, any study of Paine and his writing points out the impossibility of adequately defining "conservative and liberal." Paine was obviously a liberal, but many of his ideas

are those of America's present-day conservatives. What Paine would be today if he could return is difficult to determine.

Thomas Paine's place in American history is as a political interpreter. He did for the political philosophers those things they were not able to do themselves - sway the public mind. Paine communicated intellectual American thoughts to the commoner. Because Paine did this so adequately, we can today better judge the emotions and mental attitudes of the average American of the Revolutionary Era. Paine deserves to be better remembered in twentieth-century America, and as a great contributor to American revolutionary society, rather than as an eccentric old man.

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